

SEEKING THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD
PS. 24

INTRODUCTION:

We often sing those moving words: “The presence of the Lord is in this place.” Without question those words are true because our God is an omnipresent God. As the Psalmist celebrated in Psalm 139, there is no place you can go from the presence of the Lord. However, it is one thing for the Lord’s presence to be in this place and yet another for us to experience the presence of the Lord. While the Lord never leaves us, we may not experience His presence.

When the Psalmist asked the probing question, “Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place?,” he was wondering who could have an experience of the presence of the Lord.

This Psalm may have been written by David to celebrate the occasion when he led the people of Israel in bringing the Ark of the Covenant into the city of Jerusalem. This was before the temple was actually built, but a tabernacle was set up within the city for the Ark of the Covenant. God had promised his people that He would manifest His presence in connection with the Ark of the Covenant. Throughout the Old Testament the people of God, God’s presence was uniquely associated with the Tabernacle and more specifically with the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. What the Psalmist wants to know is what kind of person is it who can actually enjoy and experience of the presence of God. This is still a pertinent question for us.

In the midst of the Psalm he declares :“Such is the generation of those who seek Him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob.” This is the generation of God seekers, of people on a quest to experience the presence of God. Will we be content to know about God, or will we be the generation that actually and experientially knows the presence of God? This Psalm points us in the direction of really coming into a fresh experience of the presence of God.

I. THE PRESENCE WE SEEK.

In the opening and closing stanzas of this great hymn we are confronted with the reality of the God we seek. He is not the production of our imagination but the mighty God of earth and heaven. These two stanzas so we will be clear about the presence we seek.

1. The presence of the sovereign Lord of the earth.

The opening stanza of this hymn is a moving and grateful declaration concerning God. “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. For He founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.” This Lord whose presence we seek is none other than the sovereign creator and owner of the earth and everything that is in the earth.

In poetic language the Psalmist states God’s role in the creation of the earth. “For He founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.” It was the force of His will that brought order into the chaos of creation. It was the speaking of His word that caused

everything that is to have its existence. What a mighty God He must be, since He has made everything that is, and continues to govern over everything that is.

Further more He continues to hold personal claims of ownership on the earth and everything in the earth and all that live on the earth. This includes all expressions of human life, animal life, the life that is in the sea and the life that is on the earth! It all belongs to Him. The claims of man to ownership are really very puny when you compare them to the claims that the sovereign creator has upon his creation.

I suspect that most of us would be awed by the presence of a Bill Gates who has master minded Microsoft. Or we would be awed by the presence of people in high places in our own government or the governments around the world. If we were to be led into Buckingham Palace and stand in the presence of the Queen of England we would be duly impressed. What we are seeking is not the presence of some mortal like ourselves but the one who is the giver, sustainer, and Lord over all of life. It is His presence that we seek.

2. The presence of the sovereign Lord of heaven.

The last stanza of this hymn opens with a cry, “Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up you ancient doors, that the King of Glory may come in.” It seems that there is a voice from the inside of the city that raises the question, “Who is this King of Glory?” And then the company accompanying the king in His advance toward the city cry out, “The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.” Then the same refrains are repeated again to an earnest cry for the gates of the city to be open to the King of Glory as He

comes. The question is asked again, “Who is He, this King of Glory?” The answer comes thundering back, “The Lord Almighty – He is the King of Glory!” This king of glory is the one whose presence we seek. He is the king of heaven and we seek the experience of His presence on earth. He is the Lord Almighty, the Lord strong and mighty in battle – it is His presence that we seek here on earth. We seek to know the wonder and the glory of standing in the presence of the King of Glory.”

Scholars have debated the structure of this Psalm and some have concluded that this closing paragraph ought to be taken as another Psalm. As I have meditated on the Psalm and prayed over the Psalm I have come to a different conclusion. We heard the declaration, “Such is the generation of those who seek Him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob.” The very next line says that this God whom you are seeking is seeking an entrance into your life. The God that Israel is seeking is seeking Israel. He has come to the very gates of the city and the cry is for someone to open the gate and let Him come in. This presence that we seek is the presence of the God who is always seeking to make Himself known to man. He is indeed the King of Glory on a mission to establish relationship with you and with me in which we can experience His presence.

II. THE PREPARATION WE MAKE.

In response to the two-fold question, “Who may ascend the hill of the Lord, who may stand in His holy place?” The Psalmist provides an answer. Those who will be able to climb up into the presence of the Lord and enjoy his presence are those who have made adequate preparation in their own lives. In these brief statements he unveils to us the

character of the people who will experience the presence of the Lord. Even though this character summary was written milleniums ago, its claims are still so forceful when they touch our lives.

1. Prepared with clean hands.

The clean hands represent the outward display of character. It is another way of describing a life that is blameless in the eyes of the world. If we are to enjoy the presence of the Lord we must be able to lift up to Him clean hands. It is easy for our hands to become defiled. Even as you look at your hands, you are made aware of the potential that your hands have for defilement. In a world like ours it is easy for hands to become defiled with immorality. You can't come into the presence of the Lord and enjoy His presence with the hands that bear the stain of adultery, premarital sex, sexual indulgence of one form or another. You must have clean hands.

In the day to day world in which we live, it is so easy for our hands to become defiled with dishonesty. Have your hands handled dishonest deals? Has your hand been used to sign documents that you knew represented something that was not true? Have your hands been guilty of taking something that belonged to someone else? Dishonesty can defile hands. You can't come into the presence of God, Holy God, with dirty hands. Do your hands have the blood of violence upon them? Have you been guilty of acts of violence toward another human being? You can't come into the presence of God with bloody hands!

2. The preparation of a pure heart.

The heart deals with the inner side of character. The hands display what is already true in the heart. The opposite of a pure heart is not a dirty heart, but rather a divided heart.

Your heart becomes pure when all of its devotion is focused upon one object. This is the purity of heart that we must have if we come into the presence of the Lord. It means that there is no rival for the devotion of your heart before Him. A pure heart is an essential in the preparation.

3. The preparation of freedom from idolatry.

The summary in the Psalm says, “Who does not lift up his soul to an idol.” The older version used the word “vanity” for this word idol. The Hebrew word has in it the idea of nothingness or emptiness. That is a familiar way of describing an idol in the Old Testament – it is a emptiness or a nothingness. The action that is described here is that the person who is to enjoy the presence of the Lord has not turned to one of these substitutes of God to do something that only God can do.

John Calvin was right when he wrote, “The human mind is a permanent factory of idols.” It is one of the unmistakable evidence of our fallen state. We are constantly manufacturing things to which we can turn instead of turning to God who is the source of every good and perfect gift. Almost anything or person can become an idol in your life.

There is no question that government has become an idol to many in our day. All their expectations are turned toward government. If they get out of a job, they expect the

government to provide them a job. If they run short of food, they expect the government to provide food. When they get old they expect the government to take care of them. If they get sick, they expect the government to take care of them. It is very easy living in a world like ours for government to become an idol. If you are going to come into the presence of God, you've got to be free from all idolatry. When one learned student of human behavior says, "One way of looking at addiction is to see them as forms of idolatry. For the alcoholic the bottle becomes an idol." The same would be true for those who are addicted to tobacco or some other drug. It would be true for those who claim addition to sex or pornography. What has happened in your life is that you have allowed some thing to take a place in your life that belongs only to God. If you are to really experience the presence of God, you must approach Him free from the idolatry that characterizes the world around us.

4. The preparation of words of truth.

The last of the prerequisites that need to be made of our lives addresses the words of our lips. "Or swear by what is false." I think Moffett catches the heart of this when he translates, "who never breaks his word." A matter of perjury or keeping your word has been much in the news in recent days. Our nation has been shocked by our president's admission that he openly lied to us about his relationship with the young woman. Many of us are not too quick to condemn the president because we know the inclination of our own hearts toward dishonesty. Someone has defined a lie as an ever present help in time of trouble. The only problems with such help as the lie gives you is that it is almost always temporary help. As the president discovered our lies do not solve anything. What

is even more serious than that is that our lies will keep us from enjoying the presence of God. It may well be that President Clinton's lie and deceit will cost him the presidency. It may well be that it will cause him to be moved from the highest office in the world, but let me tell you something more tragic than that --it may keep you from enjoying the presence of God. You may come to church and only see people and experience the presence of people and miss the presence of God.

When you lay these matters down beside your life, do you feel ready to enter into His presence. Are there some matters that need to be cared for?

III. THE PRIVILEGE WE RECEIVE.

In the midst of this chapter the Psalmist indicates something of the privilege that comes to those who really seek Him with all their hearts and come into His presence.

1. The privilege of blessing.

"He will receive a blessing from the Lord." The personal pronoun "he" points back to the person who has prepared himself to ascend into the hill of the Lord. Or he would be the person in the letter in the last stanza who has opened the gates and allowed the King of Glory to come in. Whenever you enter into the presence of the Lord in worship and personal commitment of life you receive the blessing. It is interesting the Psalmist does not try to define or even to describe the blessing. He is content to call it "the blessing." We should understand in this that He means you come under the gracious favor of God. When you are in the presence of the Lord in such enjoyment, you are blessed.

How tragic it will be for people who have lived a lifetime with the possibility of experiencing His presence but missed it all together. They had their hearts set on lesser and trivial things and missed the greatest thing. Without question the greatest thing is to know Him and to enjoy His presence forever.

2. The privilege of His help.

The vindication from God as Savior. In his paraphrase of the Psalm Eugene Petersen translates this, "With His help they make it." The idea seems to be that God comes along side to walk with you and He commits himself to work on your behalf in the struggles of life. He will be there with you to help you do the right thing when the opportunity to do the right thing is before you. What a privilege to work and walk in companionship and partnership with the Lord God of heaven and earth!

Let me ask you a question. Even as I ask it of my own heart, how long has it been since you really experienced the presence of God in your worship and in your life? Has it been a while? Is it because you have not made the preparation and paid the price? We can know for sure that it is not because God is not seeking to manifest His presence to you. He is standing at the gate and the call is for somebody to open the gate and the call is for somebody to open the gate, lift up their heads and let the King of Glory come in. Oh, my dear friend, would you this morning dare say to the Lord God of Heaven who seeks to manifest himself in your life, O King of Glory, come in. We must be aware that when He comes in He comes as the King of Glory. He does not leave His crown on the outside of

the gate. When He comes in He brings His throne and wears His crown and assumes His place as the rightful sovereign over life. It is in that that you come to know the greatest of all joys and the highest of all privileges, the privilege of being at the presence of the eternal sovereign of heaven and sovereign of earth.